

Janusz Korczak: A Tale for Our Time

From: Bruno Bettelheim "Reflections & Recollections"

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his righteous ones," says the Psalmist. If one might ask why the deaths of the righteous ones rather than their lives are precious to the Lord, the answer is this: while the Lord is pleased with his righteous ones as long as they are living righteous lives, only at their deaths can there be certainty that they never deviated from the path of righteousness.

An ancient Jewish myth at least fifteen hundred years old has it that there must live on earth at any one time thirty-six righteous people. Only the existence of these righteous ones justifies humanity's continuation in the eyes of the Lord; otherwise, God would turn his face from the earth and we all would perish.

As long as these righteous ones walk on earth, nobody must know who they are; they remain unknown to all other men. To us they may seem quite ordinary persons; only after their death may we discover their identity. Then some do become known, and posterity can recognize their extraordinary virtue and come to admire them, their lives, and their deeds.

Whoever the other righteous ones may have been in our lifetimes, by now we can be certain about two of them, although the world became aware of them only after they had been martyred. And, as if to prove the saying of the Psalmist, it was their freely chosen death which finally made the utter righteousness of their lives apparent.

One of these two was a Franciscan priest. Father Maximilian Kolbe. The other was a Jewish physician and educator, Dr. Janusz Korczak. Both died voluntarily in German concentration camps during World War II.

Father Kolbe volunteered to be starved to death in the place of another prisoner, enabling him to live and return to his wife and children, while the priest had no such family. So Father Maximilian Kolbe was murdered by being starved to death, while the prisoner whose life he saved lived to tell the story, as did also some other prisoners who had witnessed Kolbe's death, as well as some of the SS guards who could not help being deeply impressed by the courage with which he suffered his terrible fate.

The second of these two righteous men, Dr. Janusz Korczak, steadfastly rejected many offers to be saved from extermination in the death camps. He refused to desert in extremis the orphaned children to whose evil-being he had devoted his life, so that

even as they died they would be able to maintain their faith in human goodness: that of the man who had saved their bodies and freed their minds; who had salvaged them from utter misery and restored their belief in themselves and the world; who had been their mentor in matters practical and spiritual.

Korczak sacrificed himself to keep his trust with the children, when he could easily have saved himself. He was repeatedly urged to do so by his many Polish admirers and friends, for he was a prominent figure in Polish cultural life by the time he died. Well-wishers offered to provide him with 'false identity papers' which would have allowed him to live freely, they arranged ways for him to escape (he Warsaw "ghetto and live safely outside of it. Children whom he had salvaged in the past now grown up implored him to allow them to save him, for he had been their saviour. But as the head and leading light for thirty years of the Jewish orphanage in Warsaw, Korczak was determined not to desert any of the children who had put their trust in him. As he said to (those who beseeched him to save himself: "One does not leave a sick child in the night," and "One does not leave children in a time like this."

At the German occupation of Warsaw, all Jews were forced into a ghetto, where they were destined to perish. The orphanage which Janusz Korczak directed was also to be relocated there. Knowing full well the great personal risks involved, Korczak went to the headquarters of the German command to plead the case of his children. As was his custom on similar occasions, he went there wearing his old uniform as a Polish army doctor, refusing to wear the obligatory yellow star. When told he should not bother with Jewish children but devote his physician's skill only to Polish children instead, Korczak declared that he was Jewish. So he was put into prison and tried for such "brazen behaviour."

As often before and afterward, some of his previous charges came to his rescue and bought his freedom. From then on, they tried ever more fervently and repeatedly to persuade Korczak to leave the ghetto and save himself, arranging safe escape routes false papers, places to live. But Korczak steadfastly refused to desert his children, although he knew what the end would be. He worked even more ceaselessly for the welfare of his charges, using his influence and old connections to beg for food, medicine, and other needs, and in this he was astonishingly successful. Even the smugglers knew and admired Korczak and his work, and so they helped him and his children as best they could.

The Nazis ordered that on August 6, 1942, the two hundred children who were then left in the Jewish orphanage of the Warsaw ghettos were to be taken to a train station, there to be packed into railroad carriages. Korczak, like most other adults in the ghetto, knew by then that the carnages were to take the children to their death in the gas chambers of Treblinka.

In a successful effort to assuage the children's anxiety, Korczak told them that they would all go on an outing in the country. On the appointed day he had the oldest child lead them, earning high the flag of hope, a gold four-leaf clover on a field of green — the emblem of the orphanage. As always, even in this terrible situation, Korczak had arranged things so that a child rather than an adult would be the leader of other children. He walked immediately behind this leader, holding the hands of the two smallest children. Behind them marched all the other children, four by four, in excellent order, sure of themselves, as they had been helped to be during their stay at the orphanage.

The impression received by those who saw the children walk by was that they were holding their heads high, as if in silent protest, or contempt of their murderers; but what these observers interpreted was probably only the children's self-confidence, which they had gained from their mentor. When their procession arrived at the place to which they had been ordered, the policemen, who until then had been busy whipping Jews into the carriages and cursing them while doing so, suddenly snapped to attention on beholding Korczak and the children and saluted them. The German SS officer who was commanding the guards was so startled by the dignity of Korczak and the children that he asked in wonder: "Who is this remarkable man?" It is reported that even there, at the train station, final attempts were made to save Dr. Korczak. One of the guards told him to leave—that only the children had been ordered to the train station and not he—and tried to move Korczak away. But Korczak refused, as before, to separate himself from the children, and went with them to Treblinka.

For many years preceding this, Dr. Janusz Korczak had been well known all over Poland as "the Old Doctor," which was the name he used when delivering his many state radio talks on children and their education. Through these he became a familiar name even to those who had not read any of his many novels—for one of which he had received Poland's highest literary prize—nor seen his plays, nor read any of his numerous articles on children, nor learned about his widely known work with orphans. For example, in 1981, speaking at a symposium on Janusz Korczak, the Polish theology professor Tarnowski reminisced about how, as a youngster, he had admired the radio chats of "the Old Doctor" without knowing that the person he was listening to was the well-known author who had written one of his favourite books. *King Matt the First.*

Korczak's radio talks were sensational for the young Tarnowski, as they were for nearly all other listeners, because they proved to him for the first time in his life that an adult could enter easily and naturally into the world of the child. Korczak not only understood the child's view, but deeply respected and appreciated it. While all other adults seemed unable to do true justice to the world of children.

What Korczak taught best was, to quote the title of one of his most significant books, *“How one ought to love a child.”*

Korczak loved children deeply; he devoted all the moments of his life to them. He studied them and understood them more thoroughly than most. Since he truly knew children, he did not idealize them. As there are good and bad adults, all kinds and sorts, so too Korczak knew there are all kinds of children. Working for them in many ways throughout his life and living with them in the orphanage, Korczak saw children for what they were, and was at all times deeply convinced of their integrity. He suffered from the fact that often children are treated badly, not given the credit they deserve for their intelligence and basic honesty.

Korczak was very critical of our educational system, which, then as now, weighed children down with irrelevant and unimportant information, when education’s main task ought to be helping and preparing children to change their present reality into a better future. Most of all, Korczak was convinced that the power relations between adults and children are all wrong; that they must be changed so adults would no longer be convinced of their right—even viewed as an obligation—to arrange the life and world of the child as they think best, without considering the child’s feelings about it. In Korczak’s opinion, only an education which takes very seriously the child’s view of things can change the world for the better. His deepest belief was that the child, out of a natural tendency to establish a viable inner balance within himself, tends to improve himself as best he can, when given the chance, freedom, and opportunity to do so. To give these chances to children was the centre of all his efforts.

Those who, like Korczak, single-mindedly devote themselves to making this a better world for children are usually motivated by their own unhappy childhoods. What they suffer then makes such a lasting impression that all their lives they try to come to terms with it by working to change things so that other children will not have to suffer a similar fate.

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit, the scion of two generations of educated Jews who had broken away from the Jewish tradition to assimilate themselves into Polish culture. Korczak’s grandfather was a highly regarded and very successful physician, his father an equally successful and well known lawyer. In all external respects, little Henryk’s early life was spent in very comfortable circumstances, in the well-to-do upper-middle-class home of his parents. Yet he was familiar with emotional difficulties from an early age on—his father held often grandiose and unrealistic notions of the world, and had a poorly developed ability to relate to reality. For example, he postponed registering the birth of his only son, Henryk, in consequence of which it is still unknown whether Henryk was born on July 22 of 1878 or 1879.

Even when Henryk was an infant, although all seemed well, his family lived in an atmosphere of psychological, cultural, and social alienation, which must have contributed to the father's basic mental instability. Being by birth Jewish, Henryk's parents were alienated from the Polish culture they embraced. Yet by having made themselves part of this culture, they had alienated themselves from the culture of Poland's Jews, which at that time was unique and vital. Nearly all Jews of this period living in Poland spoke and read Yiddish; their lives were dominated by Jewish religious traditions and observances. All they did and thought was informed by their religion. By contrast, Henryk's parents were non-practicing Jews who spoke only Polish. So although he was well cared for as a child, Henryk knew practically from birth what it meant to be an outsider. He remained an outsider all his life.

When Henryk was only eleven years old, his father began to suffer from serious mental disturbances, which eventually required his placement in a mental institution. He died there when Henryk was eighteen years old. With the decline of Henryk's father, the family's breadwinner, the family encountered economic hardships. From then on, Henryk had first to contribute to the family's livelihood and later to provide for it. As a schoolboy, he earned some money by tutoring other youngsters. When he became a university student, he began to support himself, his mother, and his sister by writing.

It was at this time that he adopted the pseudonym by which he would subsequently be known. Wishing to enter a literary competition, and fearing that he had no chance to win if he used his own, clearly Jewish name, Henryk submitted his work under the Polish-sounding name of Janusz Korczak, which he took from a Polish novel he happened to be reading at the time. Although he did not win this literary contest, he continued to use this pseudonym thereafter.

By that time, although choosing to be a medical student, Korczak was determined to devote his life to the betterment of the lot of children. Typically, he introduced himself to a female fellow university student by saying that he was "the son of a madman who is determined to become the Karl Marx of children." As Marx's life was devoted to the revolution which would liberate the proletariat, so Korczak's would be consecrated to the liberation of children, which would require revolutionary changes in the way they were viewed and treated by adults, who suppressed children even more painfully than the proletariat were suppressed in Marx's view. When asked what such liberation of children would imply, Korczak answered that one of its most important features would be granting them their right to govern themselves. Even at this early period he was convinced that children are able to govern themselves at least as well as their parents and educators govern them, if not much better. During his university years Korczak thought that the best way in

which he could help children was to become a paediatrician, so this is what he became.

Early on, Korczak was already sure that he would not marry because he did not wish to beget children. When the university student to whom he revealed these life plans asked him, astonished, why if he was determined to devote his life to children he did not want any of his own, Korczak answered that he would have not just a few, but hundreds of children for whom he would care. As far as we know, he never specifically said why he did not want to marry or have children, but it seems probable that he was afraid he might have inherited his father's tendency to insanity and feared to pass it on, or have a child suffer from such predicaments as he had experienced because of his father's mental instability.

As a medical student specializing in paediatrics, Korczak worked in the slums of Warsaw. He hoped that by combining medical treatment for children's physical ills with spiritual assistance, he would be able to effect fundamental changes in their living conditions. His first novel, *Children of the Street*, published in 1901 was written in anger at the degradation in which these children were forced to spend their lives.

After receiving his medical degree in 1905, Korczak began working and living in a children's hospital, to be close to the children at all times. In the meantime, he continued to publish writings on various subjects, some of them literary, others educational, medical, and socio-political. Another novel, largely drawn from his own life experiences, was titled *The Child of the Salon*. Here he took up themes which had occupied his mind as early as his fifth year, when he decided it was necessary that money and currency be abolished, so that there would no longer be any dirty, neglected, and hungry children (with whom, at five, he was not permitted to have any contact). As there should be no children living in elegant drawing rooms, isolated from less fortunate children, there also should be no children of the slums.

When the Russo-Japanese war broke out in 1905, Korczak was required to serve as an army doctor, an experience he found most upsetting, but which brought him into even closer contact with the suffering poor. Over the following eight years, in a slow development, he decided to give up the practice of medicine and devote his life entirely to helping suffering children. He once explained this shift in his life's work thus: "A spoon of castor oil is no cure for poverty and parentlessness." He meant by this that not even the best medical treatment can undo the damage which utter deprivation causes in children.

So in 1912, then in his early thirties, Korczak became director of the Jewish orphanage in Warsaw; leaving the children's hospital where he had worked and lived up to then. From then on until his end, he lived and worked at the orphanage, the

only interruption being his service as a physician in the Russian army during the First World War. But even while serving in the battle zone and having hardly any time for himself, Korczak's main concern was with the children. Instead of resting from his arduous labours as a front-line physician when he had a chance, instead of sleeping at night, he wrote what became probably his most important and influential book. *How One Ought to Love a Child*. After the end of the First World War, he also became co director of a Catholic orphans' home which he named Our Home, and which served both Jewish and Catholic children.

Most of Korczak's writings on children dealt with how one ought to relate to and come to understand them; how one ought to treat and educate them; and most important of all, how one ought to respect and love them. His writings are aphoristic in nature, since he believed that any systematic treatment of these subjects tends to become abstract, and thus to do injustice to the ever-changing expressions of a child's vitality. Repeatedly, and with ever different examples, Korczak asserted that the reason most experts do not really know children is that they study them in the laboratory or in the abstract, instead of proceeding clinically and observing them while living with them day in and day out. One of his ideals in respect to the study of living things was the French entomologist Jean Henri Fabre, who all his life observed and studied insects without ever harming any of them, let alone killing them, while his colleagues ended up by killing what they had tried to study.

Korczak's method of teaching his students at the Institute for Pedagogy in Warsaw, where he taught for many years, may be illustrated by his taking them to observe the workings of a child's heart as it could be seen on the screen of an X-ray machine. The child had to stand in front of a screen in a darkened room and was naturally apprehensive about the darkness, the unaccustomed surroundings, and the strange machinery. Speaking very softly, so as not to add to the child's fears, and deeply moved by what could be seen on the screen, Korczak enjoined his students to take a good look and never forget what they saw: "How stormily a child's heart beats when he is frightened, and this it does even more when his heart reacts to an adult's annoyance with him, not to mention when he fears to be punished."

Many of Dr. Korczak's ideas are now commonplace, but they were radically new at the beginning of this century when he first conceived them. He again and again stressed the importance of respecting the child and all his ideas, even when we cannot always agree with them. He insisted that it is wrong to base educational measures on our notions of what the child will need to know in the future, because real education ought to be concerned with what the child is now—not what we wish him to be in the future. What we do not realize today is the decree to which we owe these and many other "modern" ideas about children to Dr. Korczak's influence. Some of these ideas were also shared by a very few other contemporary educators, such as Dewey. But while educators like Dewey only conceptualized, Korczak set

his ideas into daily practice by living with the children on their terms, which he helped them to discover and set into practice.

Others, like Neill of Summerhill fame, began to set into practice more than a decade later what Dr. Korczak pioneered on a daily basis, and Neill's beliefs were based partly on the practice and experiences of Korczak. Even Neill, who was probably the most radical reformer of children's lives after Korczak, did not go as far as Korczak did in insisting that children must govern themselves. Korczak helped his children create a children's court, and he submitted himself to its judgments.

Korczak knew well that despite his utter devotion to children, he himself was the product of a faulty upbringing and therefore not free of shortcomings; his character to some degree had been botched up by the way he was brought up as is true for all of us. So for him personally, the children's court was an even more important institution of the children's society he had created in the orphanage than even the children's parliament, their newspaper, or their other independent enterprises. He reported that during a six-month period he found himself accused at least five times before this children's court. Once it was because, carried away by his emotions, he had slapped a child who had severely provoked him. He readily admitted his guilt, and that the seriousness of the provocation could not serve as an excuse for slapping the child. Another of his misdeeds had been to send a rambunctious child out of the dormitory so the other children would be able to sleep. His guilt had been that he had acted on his own decision, whereas he ought to have let the rest of the children decide whether they wanted to sleep at the price of having the offending child put out of the room. Another time he was tried and found wrong by the court of children because during a trial he had offended one of the child judges. And still another time he had accused a girl of theft, instead of letting the court of children decide whether she was guilty

We owe to one of the child judges who found Korczak guilty of his fifth offence a vivid image of the court proceedings. Korczak had playfully put a little girl up in a tree, and when she had become fearful he had joked about it. He was found guilty, according to Rule 100 of the children's court. The judge's decision was: "Without the accused himself excusing, defending, or condoning his action, the court nevertheless finds him guilty." As soon as the verdict was rendered, the girl who had accused Korczak threw herself crying into his arms and lovingly embraced him.

With such arrangements one might think that life in the orphanage was chaotic, or anarchic. It was far from that, however: the children's self-regulation and the children's court saw to it. Korczak himself knew very well that self-control was a most necessary ingredient for being able to live a good life. He asserted that when everything is permissible, then no willpower can develop: but willpower is most necessary if the child is to meet the rigours of life successfully.

Not only when he was accused did the Old Doctor gladly submit himself to the judgment of the children - he sought it always, about everything he did. For example, Korczak read to the children out of his books, asking them for their criticisms, which he took very seriously. Again and again, he said and wrote that the children were his best and most important teachers that he had learned all he knew from them.

It was the personal courage and depth of feeling with which Korczak lived out his ideas that made him unique. The flavour of these feelings may be conveyed by a reply he gave to a question about the principles underlying his actions. He replied: "I kiss the children with my eyes, with my thoughts, as I ask myself the question: Who are you, you who are such a wonderful secret to me? What are the questions you dare not ask? I kiss them through my arduous desire to discover in which way, in which manner, in regard to what problems I can help you. I embrace children in my mind as the astronomer tries to embrace in his mind the star which is, which has been, and which will be." And children were indeed the stars he tried to reach, by which he guided his life.

Maybe Korczak's philosophy is best expressed by the words with which he said goodbye to a group of orphans as they were ready to "graduate" from the orphanage, whose services they had outgrown. He told them:

We say goodbye to you and wish you well on your long travel into a faraway country. Thus your trip has but one name, and one destination: your life. We have thought long and hard how we should say goodbye to you, what advice to give you on your way. Unfortunately words are poor and weak vehicles to express ourselves. So we can give you nothing on your way.

We give you no God, because Him you have to seek in your soul, in a solitary struggle. We give you no fatherland, because that you have to find through the efforts of your own heart, through your own thoughts. We don't give you love for your fellow men, because there is no love without forgiveness, and to forgive is a laborious task, a hardship which only the person himself can decide to take upon himself.

We give you only one thing: the desire for a better life which does not yet exist, but which will someday come into being, a life of truth and justice. Maybe the desire for it will guide you to God, to a real fatherland, and to love. Farewell, don't forget it. In order to help other adults and children overcome their alienation, which is deadly for both, Korczak wrote a novel *When I Am Little*.

Again, in which he posed both as an adult and as a child, as a teacher and as a pupil, trying to make each of them understand the others problems, joys, and frustrations,

comprehend the other's life. But this book's approach did not turn out to serve his purpose as well as he had hoped.

So Korczak tried once more and produced his most successful, most widely read book: *King Matt the First*, published in 1928. This was the book which, Professor Tarnowski stated in his recollection of his childhood, changed his view of adults, because he realized that the author of this novel, at least, fully understood children, the way they feel and act. *King Matt the First* is the story of a boy who on the death of his father becomes king, and he immediately sets out to reform his kingdom for the benefit of children and adults alike. Both in the original Polish and in its German translation this story has become a children's favourite; it was finally published in this country in 1986.

King Matt is none other than Korczak himself re-created as a child, courageously doing battle against all the injustices of the world, most of all those inflicted on children. All is told from the perspective of this utterly sincere boy who, while always remaining a child, pursues with great courage and determination his goal: to remake a world very much like ours into a good world for children and, in so doing, create a better world for adults. Korczak appears in the story also in his adult form, as the old doctor who foresees the troubles into which King Matt will run, whose heart bleeds for King Matt. The old doctor tries to help but fails in his efforts: the world is simply too insensitive to the needs of children; it does not understand what is right for them, does not appreciate their sincerity, their ability to take care of their own affairs, nor how they could help this become a much better world for all of us.

What makes this fable unique is the exquisite insight into the psychology of children it reveals, including the immaturity of some of their plans, which eventually becomes their undoing. It is marvellous how in this story a modern world and its people exist side by side with the completely imaginary world, one brought into being through the hopes, aspirations, and fantasies of a spunky, exceedingly bright, imaginative, sensitive, and completely honest little boy.

King Matt the First is a rare masterpiece in revealing to us how a child sees the world of adults and its operations, and how, given the freedom to do so, he spontaneously reacts to it. By describing Matt's experiences, the story tells how a child again and again will trust adults, only to be deeply and painfully disappointed by them. It shows how devious adults are in their dealings with children as well as with other adults, and how much more direct and honest children are in their dealings with adults and with each other. Further, it demonstrates how even some adults who mean well are unable to truly comprehend the essence of children's deepest concerns, desires, and hopes. Most impressive of all, this story renders a true picture of how in the child deep seriousness and naive but real wisdom in understanding the world are at all times inextricably interwoven with the need for

childish play, for deep friendship with adults and peers, for a life of the imagination—but paramount, a life of freedom, dignity, and responsibility.

King Matt is a late flower in the venerable tradition of the *Bildungs-roman* so characteristic of the best literature of the Enlightenment. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Gottfried Kellers *Der Grant Heinrich*, and Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* are but three examples of the genre, which relates the emotional, moral, and personal development of a hero under the impact of the vagaries, trials, and tribulations of his existence. While all other novels of this type follow the inner growth of the hero into maturity, *King Matt the First* tells only about personal development during childhood. In this, as in so many other ways, Korczak's novel is truly unique.

That Korczak would have written such a novel of enlightenment is hardly surprising, since his entire life was devoted to spreading enlightenment concerning children. *King Matt the First*, in addition to being quite entertaining, is full of insights into how children see adults, what they want from them and out of life. Particularly revealing is the list of reforms which King Matt's children's parliament wishes to see enacted.

Of these reforms, for personal reasons one of them in particular pleased me: the children's wish to abolish being kissed by adults. Many years ago I suggested this idea, without any awareness that Korczak had done the same much earlier, because all children I knew who dared to express their opinion on such matters were uniform in their abhorrence of being kissed indiscriminately. My suggestion was met with the strongest objections. This, among other experiences, taught me how difficult it is for adults to accept that children do experience things differently than they, and how ready adults are to accept how they felt as children. Most adults are convinced that what to them is an obvious expression of love and affection must be the same for children; they do not realize that children and adults can experience the same event very differently. Children enjoy and need bodily contact, not in a form which is part of adult sexuality, such as being kissed, but rather through being held, touched, and cuddled—that is, through involvement of the whole body in pleasurable kinaesthetic experiences, rather than a contact concentrated on a particular bodily organ, such as the mouth. All through his lectures and his writings Korczak told how children are delighted when adults show them affection in the way they desire to receive it: foremost, by taking them seriously, and secondly, by treating and playing with them on the level they enjoy.

Part of the Enlightenment tradition within which *King Matt* is written is the Rousseauist notion of the noble savage who, although primitive in outlook, customs, and behaviour, is actually more decent and moral than his European counterparts. This notion is found in *King Matt*, along with the other that children are more decent and moral than are adults. It is a black king in *King Matt* who is eager to set the

reforms suggested by Matt into practice, trying to become a better person and make things better for his people. Only the black kings are Matt's true friends, ready to give their lives for him, while the white kings, despite nice promises, in the end betray him scandalously.

The story ends when King Matt's carefully but all too childish planned reform collapses as the result of his being nefariously betrayed by the world of adults, and because the children, being children, all too carelessly and childishly and, on occasion, selfishly execute his plans.

As Korczak succeeded ever more with children, he became ever more isolated from the outside world. The more it became known with what fervour he fought for the freedom of the children to arrange their own lives to develop themselves in their own chosen ways, the more he himself became an outsider. It was mentioned that his parents had been outsiders in respect to the dominant Polish culture they had made their own because they were Jewish, and had been outsiders to the Jews because they were fully assimilated to the Polish world. In addition to this alienation Korczak had inherited from his parents, he now became alienated from the Polish right as a radical reformer, and from the Polish left because he single-mindedly fought for the liberation of children, not believing that it would automatically come as part of a socialist revolution.

To the various Polish literary groups, Korczak was suspect despite his great literary successes, because he did not adhere to any of the various literary movements and did not get his impetus from them, but from children. Educators feared and rejected him because he severely criticized their methods. Alienated from all these adult circles, he drew all the closer to the world of children, who, like him, were alienated from the world of adults. Yet to undo the alienation of children from adults and vice versa was the goal for which he lived and worked his entire life.

From the time of the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Korczak knew the end was coming. His growing sense of desolation made him anxious to leave a final testament. The diary he wrote during the last months of his life in the ghetto, mainly during the months of May and August 1942, represents, to quote his words, "not so much an attempt at a synthesis as a grave of attempts, experiments, and errors. Perhaps it may prove of use to somebody, sometime, in fifty years...." These were truly prophetic words, because it will soon be fifty years since the Old Doctor wrote them, and now his works and deeds are becoming more widely known, understood, and appreciated than ever before.

In July 1942, less than a month before Korczak's end, his devoted followers and friends made another attempt to save him. His Aryan collaborator and friend Igor Newerly brought him false papers, which would have permitted Korczak to leave the

ghetto with Newerly. While all Newerly's entreaties failed to shake Korczak's determination not to leave his children, to show his appreciation for Newerly's efforts Korczak promised that he would send him the diary he had kept during his ghetto years. As always, Korczak kept his word, and a few days after he and the children were taken to Treblinka, Newerly received the diary. He bricked it up in a safe house, and after the end of the war rescued it from there. It has been published with the title *Ghetto Diary*, and aside from King Matt it is the only one of Korczak's many books which so far have appeared in English.

In this diary Korczak mentions the last play which he chose to be performed by the children for a ghetto audience, shortly before he and the children were murdered. Although it was forbidden for Jews to perform plays by Aryan authors, the play chose was Tagore's *The Post Office*. (Korczak, as usual, disregarded the risk of punishment for flouting the orders of the SS.) The play's central figure is a dying boy whose end is made bearable to him because he is made to believe that the king will visit him, and that his dearest wish will be fulfilled by the king. Korczak must have chosen this play because he already knew how he would try to make their dying bearable to his children. When after the performance he was asked why he chose this play, he answered that eventually one had to learn to accept serenely the angel of death.

Korczak had learned to do this, and he made it possible for his children to do the same. On the last pages of his ghetto diary, he wrote this confession: "I am angry with nobody. I do not wish anybody evil. I am unable to do so. I do not know how one can do it." Up to the last, he lived according to what the rabbinical fathers once wrote. When asked, "When everyone acts inhuman, what should a man do?" their answer was, "He should act more human." This is what Korczak did to the very end.

After World War II, Janusz Korczak—his work and his life—became a legend, and not only in Poland. He and his work are now well known among European educators, and in many countries outside of Europe. His work is studied at European universities, and symposia are devoted to it. Many monuments have been erected to honour him; a play, *Korczak and the Children*, has been widely performed. Books have been written on his work; his own writings have been republished and translated into many languages. He was posthumously given the German Peace Prize. The hundredth anniversary of his birth, 1978-79, was declared Korczak Year by UNESCO, and in Poland and many other countries. Pope John Paul II said once that for the world of today, Janusz Korczak is a symbol of true religion and true morality.

The memorial at Treblinka to the 840,000 Jews who were murdered there consists of large rocks marking the area in which they died. These rocks bear no inscriptions other than the name of the city or the country from which the victims came. One

rock alone is inscribed with a man's name: It reads: "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the Children." This, I feel, is the way he would have wished to be remembered now— as the most devoted friend of children.

End